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ABSTRACT

Recent evidence suggests that low-income, inner-city parents favor school choice. African-American and Latino parents' preferences regarding choice were analyzed. Inner-city parents' school choices occur within a context constrained by Anglo and middle-class strategies of containment. The paper examines minority dissatisfaction with the public schools and the push for private school choice and details the environment in which these parents must choose a school and the factors that shaped this context, such as suburban parents' ability to spend more than what city parents can spend per pupil. Innercity parents' concerns over their children's schools arose from criticism of the local public school and long-term social and economic trends of the city. Choice proposals, segregationist strategies, and community schools are discussed, including the notion that Anglo-choice advocates' hope that choice will preempt increased expenditures on urban schools--preventing a redistribution of tax monies from suburbs to the inner city. The paper concludes that racial conflict over educational policy means that many minority students will not be placed in neighborhood schools of choice, leaving the vast majority of urban students in underfunded public schools. (Contains 40 references.) (RJM)

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PARTICIPATION AS PARENTAL CHOICE: Can the Marketplace Create More Democratic Institutions?

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (April 13-17, 1998, San Diego, CA)

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Choice proponents have often proclaimed their special concern for low-income students. As Lamar Alexander said it, "What we're simply trying to do is give people without money more of the same choices of schools that people with money already have" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992, p. 3). Numerous commentators have received these promises with incredulity. Even though many of the current choice proposals target low-income families, critics have tended to view this as a strategic means of making choice acceptable to its opponents (Lowe, 1992, p. 30). For instance, when the Christian Coalition began its "Good Samaritan" project focused on bringing choice programs to the inner city, many commentators accused the group of crass opportunism--of attempting to pave the way for the funding of religious schools by first getting the public to support private schools serving low-income parents.

However, the credibility of choice proposals focusing upon low-income groups has been recently bolstered by evidence suggesting a large proportion of African American and Latino/a inner city parents favor choice. Not only do large percentages of surveyed inner city parents favor choice, but political movements

for choice have featured coalitions of African American and Latino city parents with Republican choice reformers (Carl, 1996). Thus, choice proponents' reassurances that they are concerned with improving the educational circumstances of low income parents have been given a patina of plausibility.

It is thus critical to understand the preferences of African American and Latino/a parents as one aspect of a larger struggle occurring within the society. Inner city parents' endorsement of choice occur within a rather desperate context that has been created largely by Anglo and middle class strategies of containment. Within the conditions created by housing segregation and economic discrimination, under-funded public schools have undoubtedly failed their students in countless cases. In response to this record of inadequate public schooling and to the failures of desegregation and of efforts to redistribute educational resources, inner city parents have--quite understandably--turned to modestly-funded private schools, which in many cases, have their roots in the community control movements of the 1970s.

While we applaud these parents' efforts to find good schools for their children under adverse conditions, it's critical to note that inner city parents are opting for choice in the belief that equitable public schools are politically infeasible. Policymakers

who offer choice as the best way to serve inner-city youth are capitalizing on parents' sense that equity is impossible and effectively attempting to institutionalize our acceptance of the drastic gap between suburban and city schools. Thus, the current wave of proposals stressing the importance of choice for the most needy families symbolizes further deterioration of our society's commitment to educating all students.

Minority Dissatisfaction with the Public Schools and the Push for Private School Choice

Increasingly, African Americans and Latinos in urban centers are viewing private school choice and vouchers as a viable option. Even though a handful of public-private school choice programs have been established (e.g., Milwaukee, Cleveland for 15,000 and 3,000 children respectively), the movement for private school choice continues to gain momentum. Recently, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies issued results of a poll that showed 65% of Latinos and 56% of African Americans supporting vouchers for private school choice as compared to 47% of whites. This poll data also indicated strong (86%) support for choice and vouchers among African Americans aged 26-35 and 70% of African Americans earning less than $15,000 a year (Brooke, 1997). For African Americans and

Latinos in the urban areas, part of the fuel of the pro voucher movement in many cities can be seen through the dismantling of busing to achieve racial integration and the general decline of academic performance in public schools.

In Denver for example, the 1997 school-wide standardized achievement tests for 4th graders showed that 58% of the white students were at or above grade level in reading comprehension and writing skills, yet only 24% of African American and Chicano students were proficient in reading comprehension and 10% in writing. Chicano and African American students comprise 3/4 of the 68,000 students in the Denver Public School system. As a result of these trends, a survey of Denver voters indicated that 93% of African Americans and 80% of Chicanos perceived that their children were receiving a substandard education in the public schools (Brooke, 1997). The growing dissatisfaction with the public schools in Denver was echoed by Vivian Wilson, an administrator in the Union Baptist Excel Institute, an all-black private school that stresses discipline and a back to basics curriculum that also charges 1/2 of the average per pupil expenditure for public schooling in Denver. Wilson stated that "if you have a free market system of education, everyone should have a right to choose and Black and Hispanic people should not be held against their will

(Brooke, 1997, p. A7). The support for vouchers is also garnering support from some Colorado Republican political leaders as well since a law suit for vouchers was filed in the Denver District court last fall.

The support for choice can also be seen in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program which allows for vouchers to be used by low-income residents of the city to send their children to participating nonsecectarian private schools in the city. Part of the movement behind the choice plan in Milwaukee was ushered in by the wave of Reagan political conservatism that stressed deregulation and privatization and has been exemplified by current Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson. However, Carl (1996) also points to other factors that led up to the enactment of the Milwaukee choice plan, such as the growing dissatisfaction among many minority parents with the failures of the public schools to educate their children. A second factor behind the choice movement in Milwaukee was the presence of small but strong private schools that already served Latino and African American populations and efforts in the 1970s and 80s to secure public funding through vouchers for these schools. The growing African American political power in the city for more community control of schools called for by Howard Fuller, the former superintendent of the Milwaukee schools (and as

exemplified by the neo-conservative, neo-liberal black leader Polly Williams, see Carl, p. 274) who became disillusioned with the white liberal Democrats and their overall failure to alleviate the poor conditions of the inner city, was a third element that led to the adoption of private school choice in Milwaukee. There was also significant symbolic (as well as some small financial) support from right-wing politically conservative organizations such as the Bradley Foundation. According to Carl (1996) the convergence of these "unusual allies" (p.266) can indeed happen in other cities as white liberals abandon urban education and conservatives call for greater empowerment through privatization which also strikes strong accord with a growing number of inner city African American and Latino parents who want good schools for their children.

The importance of quality schooling is one that is most prominent as a concern for urban Latino and African American parents in cities. This can be seen in the results of the 1997 report from the Public Policy Forum and the interviews they conducted with 270 parents in Cleveland and Milwaukee regarding how they evaluate a school for their children under the new public-private school choice plans operating in each city. For these parents, test score results are not their primary concern when judging the quality of the school. Rather, it is curriculum and

methods of instruction. The parents (59%) did not want to know detail-specific information (e.g. lesson plans, book lists), but they were definitely concerned with obtaining general knowledge about what is being taught at a particular school of choice and how the subject matter is being taught by the teachers (Public Policy Forum, 1997). The second major trend that emerged from the interview data was the parental concern over information on teachers. The parents wanted to know if the school of their choice had caring, committed and qualified teachers. Parents concerns on teacher quality centered on concerns such as: how do the teachers treat the children? Do they establish respect in the classroom? How do they control a class? What are the teachers' values? Are they easy to talk to? Are they bilingual? (p.6). Some of the parents interviewed also expressed interest in the teacher qualifications with complaints about how bad teachers who were uncaring and unqualified to teach were often recycled in the public school system. Overall, the implications of the findings from the Policy Forum study are that the parents participating in choice plans in both cities view schools from an individual perspective with regard to what will be best for their child's educational and social needs.

The politics of urban education has now seemingly turned on the interest of minority parents and what they want from schooling. The voucher/choice debate has cast African Americans in a particular central role as political forces lobby for their support in the effort to reconfigure urban education. However, as Staples (1997) points out, even as the choice/voucher debate in urban education will probably be another part of the new reconfiguration of how education will be delivered in the cities in the 21st century, the broader question that needs to be asked is will this also spur efforts to comprehensively improve the quality and results of schooling for all students, especially those in the inner cities? Staples reported that the overwhelming majority of parents of the Cleveland participants in the voucher plan (85%) said they took part for academic reasons and their children's education, while 80% of the parents surveyed cited school safety as their main concern for opting for private school choice. In addition, two-thirds of the voucher parents surveyed in Cleveland reported strong satisfaction with their choice and the academic quality of their child's school (Staples, 1997, p. 49).

The Choices of Inner-City Parents In Context

Choice proponents would have us view inner city parents' support of choice as testimony to the beneficent powers of the market. Diane Ravitch, for instance, promises that allowing low income parents to receive scholarships to be used in the school of their choice would transform them into "empowered consumers rather than hapless clients ignored by an unresponsive bureaucracy" (Ravitch, 1997, pp. 254-55). However, choice analyses rely upon a abstract conception of the market and are distinctively blind to the historical processes of economic and social relations which shape our urban areas and the opportunities faced by inner city parents (Cookson, 1992, p. 94). African American and Latino/a parents' support of choice, at present, is a response to patterns of institutional racism which have denied many of their children meaningful opportunities within the public schools. Long term segregationist strategies have divided our urban areas; and in education, the failure of desegregation and redistributive policies have signaled to African American and Latino/a parents that their children will receive supportive educational treatment only if they take aggressive actions to find educational opportunities outside the public schools.

The fundamental features of the historical context faced by inner city parents were shaped by the switch from heavy industry

and manufacturing to a political economy based on a service industry that serves client and consumer needs in an increasingly competitive global market, as well as demographic changes in the racial, ethnic, language and economic status of the urban populations (Barnekov and Rich, 1995; Bettis, 1994; Kantor and Brenzel, 1992). After the urban unrest of the 1960s, the strategic placement of available high quality housing and employment opportunities in the suburban and exurban areas in the 1970s and 1980s created a form of "urban containment" (Wilhelm, 1970; Massey and Eggers, 1990; Orfield and Ashkinaze, 1991) in which whites (later followed by some middle class African Americans and Latinos) left the cities which were in turn populated by larger numbers of lower SES minority groups (Wilson, 1996). As the urban tax base declined during this period, so did city services as well as an equitable funding base for the schools (Darden, Dunleep and Galster, 1992). All of these factors were linked to an increasing racially polarizing ideological agenda directed by powerful conservative forces, as they sought to secure political control through attacks on African Americans and other minority groups living in cities as well as carefully mounted campaigns against public education using the poor conditions of urban schools as the

primary example of failure (Barnes, 1995; Edsall and Edsall, 1992; Hochschild, 1995).

The strategies of containment creating housing segregation and employment discrimination set the general context which shaped urban educational policies in the last three decades. Even though educational policies focused upon desegregation and redistribution were intended to counter the inegalitarian aspects of segregationist strategies, their actual impact was negligible, since they were mere palliatives in response to the larger reorganization of metropolitan areas along the lines of class and race.

Efforts at desegregation were offered as a means of addressing the educational conditions of students of color, but a combination of white resistance and the actual failures of integrated education have convinced many African American and Latino/a parents that their children can be better served in neighborhood private schools. Where parent resistance to integration was overcome, students of color commonly faced discrimination in the process of integrating schools. African American and Latino/a students were more likely than Anglo students to be bused to schools outside of their neighborhoods, often being dispersed throughout the city (Faltz and Leake, 1996, p. 244). Once in integrated settings,

students of color faced "second generation discrimination." African American students were overrepresented in Educably Mentally Retarded classes, underrepresented in gifted classes, underrepresented in rates of graduation, and subjected to higher levels of corporeal punishment and suspensions than Anglo students (Meier, Stewart, and England, 1989, pp. 82, 84-5, 87).

Thus, it should not be surprising that when Faltz and Leake (1996) compared the success rates of African American students in Milwaukee Public Schools, they found a dependable correlation showing higher levels of success in those schools with higher percentages of African American students (p. 240). Consequently, the history of desegregation showed inner-city parents that their kids were not wanted in integrated schools--that white parents resisted busing outright, and that once integration was achieved, students of color could expect mistreatment.

Inner city parents also witnessed the repeated failures of cities and states to adequately fund inner city schools. With the large-scale movement of businesses and people out of the city and to the suburb, drastically disparate tax bases and educational funding levels were established (Carnegie Center for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). By pooling their wealth within the legal confines of a suburb, suburban parents were able to spend up

to four times what city parents were spending per pupil. As a result, many urban schools now face basic deterioration of the physical plant, an absence of educational materials, and overcrowding (Kozol 1991).

While suburban parents have spent generously on their local schools, they have--as a group--resisted policies which would redistribute taxes monies across the nation and state. Beginning in the late 1970s, reaction against Great Society policies has limited Federal spending, sharply reducing its proportion of educational expenditures (Odden 1986). Similarly, statewide tax revolts, fueled by racial beliefs that the government was taxing the middle class to aid people of color, have preempted any redistribution efforts (Edsall and Edsall, 1991). Political efforts devoted to redistributing educational expenditures, like that of the ex-Governor Florio of New Jersey, met with an aggressive and hostile political response from middle-class and wealthy citizens. Florio was voted out of office and replaced by a Republican candidate who offered school choice as an alternative to redistribution.

Consequently, the concerns inner-city parents have concerning their children's schools do not stem merely from criticisms of the local public school. Rather, a reading of the long-term social and

economic trends of the city would suggest that the recent decline of the inner-city public school is likely to persist.

Choice Proposals, Segregationist Strategies, and Community Schools

The current battles over choice find Anglo policymakers and African American and Latino/a parents in apparent agreement even as they are pursuing conflicting racial projects. While both groups accept current levels of segregation, Anglo policymakers use choice as an extension of the strategies of containment so influential in recent policymaking: they wish to continue the fiscal austerity starving inner-city schools; their choice plans allow for the education of only a small portion of inner-city students; and they hope to maintain a standard Eurocentric curriculum even in schools of choice. Inner city parents, in contrast, wish to use schools of choice as a modestly-funded alternative to the public schools, where they will have far greater control over their children's education. Successful schools in Milwaukee, for instance, emphasize the school's connection to the community, the teachers' commitment to students, and an Afrocentric curriculum that will enable students to deconstruct the privilege of whiteness.

Anglo policymakers have long viewed choice as an policy alternative which maintained high levels of segregation. White resistance to desegregation plans in many cities was one of the factors precipitating the movement towards educational choice (Henig 1994). Judges began to make magnet schools central to the desegregation plans of many cities in the hope that parents and students might voluntarily integrate when programs attractive to Anglo parents were placed in inner-city schools. Congress then passed funding for desegregation plans which used mechanisms of voluntary integration. Despite the apparent commitment to desegregation, choice programs have reaffirmed segregated institutions; studies of choice plans in major cities suggest that choice has accentuated segregation between schools (Moore and Davenport 1990).

Moreover, it's clear that Anglo choice advocates hope that choice is an alternative that will preempt increased expenditures on urban schools--preventing a redistribution of tax monies from suburb to inner city. Chester Finn has long-argued against increased expenditures on public education (Finn, 1991, pp. 76-7), and this stance can only mean that more money should not be poured into city schools (since suburban schools are handsomely funded). Recently, Finn dismissed proposals like Sizer's and Comer's as

merely a "scheme to bring more resources into schools" (Finn, 1997, 231).

Indeed, it appears as though Anglo choice proponents view choice as a means of bringing more private resources to the aid of urban schools--getting churches and neighborhood schools to subsidize the project of educating U.S. citizens. Ravitch argues that the enrollment increases we can expect in the next decades "will force public officials either to invest billions of dollars in constructing new schools or to use all existing facilities fully" (Ravitch, 1997, p. 259). Instead of building new schools in the city, choice proponents hope that churches and neighborhood groups will take up the slack and provide the resources and educational conditions that the state is unwilling to pay for (see, for example, Archer 1998).

However, it's clear that this ad hoc approach to educating inner-city youth can only place a small percentage of the kids in question; for instance, when the Urban League of Chicago made a survey of desirable educational cites in private and public schools in the Chicago area, they were only able to locate 5,228 open positions--a fraction of the urban students needing to be educated (Henig, 1994, p. 18). Thus, choice proponents are actually calling

for an abandonment of the historic commitment to educating all citizens in the name of fiscal austerity.

Even though choice reformers hope to limit resources flowing to inner-city schools, they nonetheless hope to control curriculum content in schools of choice. Finn (1991) argues for national testing to govern choice proposals. Diane Ravitch (1997) has argued that schools which espouse racist beliefs or religious hatred should not be included under a private school choice plan. Ravitch has taken a strong stand against Afrocentric education and curriculum. It appears as though choice proponents wish to prevent curricula which expose social construction of whiteness and white power and privilege.

However, inner city parents seem well aware that many Anglo choice reformers are not primarily concerned with aiding students of color. As Polly Williams said when the coalition between conservative Anglo groups and inner city parents divided in Milwaukee, "I knew all along they didn't care about my children." "If they really cared about our community the way they say, we would not be in such dire need right now. They have all the power and the money in their hands. They could help make the conditions better in our community. But they don't" (Miner, 1977, p. 10).

Support for choice among inner-city parents in Milwaukee thus has little to do with trust in the market or the promises of choice reformers. Rather these parents appear to be harkening back to the community-building agenda of the 1960s, when parents and community groups directly challenged white racism in the schools and pushed for "Black Power" (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967) and community control of schools. This in turn led toward the development of more decentralization of the bureaucracy and community enablement, empowerment and African American control of teaching and administrative positions (Lewis and Nakagawa, 1995). It was also coupled with more recent calls from urban business leaders and neighborhood parents to have the schools be more accountable to concerns over equity issues, such as high drop out rates, low levels of student achievement, student violence, indifferent teachers and administrators, and poor physical plant facilities.

Thus, the Black independent schools (such as the consortium that comprise the Council of Independent Black Institutions, see Shujaa and Afrik, 1996) have had the control of education by black people as the paramount objectives for the formation of independent schools. Furthermore, the independent black schools have had a strong history of seeing their mission grounded in the Pan-Africanist spirit and philosophy of educating African American

youth to see their connection to the broader African experience in the U.S. and globally. The independent black schools also see their charter as one in which the European world view is deconstructed and replaced with an African world view that also makes valuable contributions to curriculum and instruction of African American youth (pgs. 258-261).

Thus Faltz and Leake argue that many parents in Milwaukee are sending their children to African American immersion schools with an Afrocentric curriculum. These schools seek to educate students amongst a largely minority student population, with a curriculum that "evolves from the life experiences of the students and clearly embraces the heritage of Africans and African Americans" (Faltz and Leake, 1996, p. 247). A strong sense of community is fostered, linking parents to the school and teachers to students. They say, the "premise of these unique schools is to lay the foundation for a realistic historical and political analysis of African Americans in our society" (Faltz and Leake, 1996, p. 246).

The aims of inner city parents and educators who now believe in choice constitute a self-conscious response to the strategies of dominant white groups. Even though they expect to operate on a budget far smaller than the ones operating in suburban schools, educators view choice as a means to reroute some public monies in

a direction that will help them build their schools and communities.

Unfortunately, this racial conflict over educational policy is leaving unaddressed the fate of the many students who will not be placed in neighborhood schools of choice. The vast majority of urban students will be left in public schools with even fewer resources than before. It is probably this profound reversal of a historic commitment to educating all our citizens that prompted the African American Ministers Leadership Council to denounce choice as a means of diverting funds from the public schools. As the Reverend Timothy McDonald said recently, "there's nothing that would be worse for minority interests than the defunding of public education" (Saunders, 1998).

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